Professional Identity and Status: An Ethnography of Architects in Professional Service Firms

A thesis submitted by

Sumati Ahuja

Doctor of Philosophy

UTS Business School, Management Discipline Group

University of Technology Sydney

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Sumati Ahuja, declare that this thesis is submitted in the fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), in the Business School, Management Discipline Group, at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PAPERS CONTAINED IN THE THESIS

The following list summarises Sumati Ahuja's overall contributions to the co-authored papers in this thesis.

Paper	Sumati Ahuja's contribution
Ahuja, S., Heizmann, H. and Clegg, S. (Conditional acceptance, April 2018: under 4rth review) 'Emotions and Identity Work: Emotions as discursive resources for the construction of junior architects' identities', *Human Relations.* Sumati Ahuja: Helena Heizmann: Stewart Clegg:	Overall: 80% 16/05/18 15/05/18.
Ahuja, S., Nikolova, N. and Clegg, S. (2017) 'Paradoxical Identity: The Changing Nature of Architectural Work and its Relation to Architects' Identity', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, vol. 4, no. 1. Sumati Ahuja: Natalia Nikolova: Stewart Clegg:	Overall: 80% N. Nikolova 16/05/18 15/05/18
Ahuja, S., Nikolova, N. and Clegg, S. (under review; 2nd revise and resubmit) 'Paradox of Professional Identity: Both best for client and best for project', *Journal of Professions and Organization.* Sumati Ahuja: Natalia Nikolova: Stewart Clegg:	Overall: 80% N. Nikolova 16/05/18 15/05/18
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Preface

My research into professionals in organizations was initially inspired by my experiences as a practicing architect and educator. Curious about how to best prepare students for practice and frustrated by the lack of leadership I witnessed in architectural practice, I turned to academia. I wanted to make sense of my own experiences and understand more accurately the tensions confronting contemporary architects in the course of day-to-day work and how they respond to the changing world of work. The study began with broad questions about the meaning and significance of work. My fascination with work as an activity that takes up a great part of our daily lives is tied with the centrality of work to the constitution of the self. Originally, based on personal observations, two things intrigued me: on the one hand, architects were presumed to have rewarding careers and saw themselves as idealists in pursuit of designing for the greater good of society, modeling themselves on the heroic image of globally famous architects – mostly men. On the other hand, architectural work involved several tensions including intense competition for jobs, extremely long hours, demanding clients and crippling regulations, all leading to high levels of work stress. In other words, what I empirically observed was a mismatch between the long-standing heroic self-image of architects akin to the mythical figure of Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead* (Rand 1943) and the near impossibility of ever being able to realize those aspirations. I was particularly struck by how little has changed in the 30 years since Dana Cuff's (1991) seminal study of architectural practice. Students are still hopelessly ill-prepared for the real world of work, and at first glance, architects' offices still resemble those of the 1900s. The only noticeable difference is that computers have replaced the drawing boards. Yet, architects of the 21st century are operating in a transformed landscape of work. Large multidisciplinary design firms are de rigueur. Projects have become so complex that they require the expertise of a myriad of specialists. Clients have become more complex and increasingly influence design on large-scale construction projects. Client organizations demand not just design excellence but considerable financial savvy. Yet, despite these transformative and irreversible changes, the myth of the individual genius endures, and the profession continues to honor the individual–hero architect. Oddly, instead of diving in and shaping the world for the better, the architectural profession appears locked in a crisis of relevance. In light of these enduring contradictions, this research originated from general questions about what working as an architect on large-scale urban renewal projects entails. I started with two broad sociological questions: What do architects do in the actual practice of professional work? What implications does the practice of professional work have on the professionals' self-concepts? I don't claim to have all the answers yet, but this research has been a valuable step in addressing these questions.

Abstract

There is a growing consensus that the nature of professional work is changing. Traditionally, the status conferred by the title 'professional' signaled a claim to specialist knowledge such that professionals were trusted advisors who played an important economic and social role (as experts in justice, health and education) in knowledge-intensive societies. However, a range of fundamental changes such as the rise of managerialism, increasingly interdependent work structures and the active involvement of increasingly more-knowledgeable clients, have challenged these assumptions suggesting that professional work faces an uncertain future. In this thesis, I argue that such crucial changes to the landscape of professional work trigger tensions for architects' identity and status premised on notions of expert authority. I problematize long-held assumptions of professional identity and status by focusing on the interpretations and actions of individuals in their day-to-day work.

This research was designed and constructed from an interpretivist perspective adopting a tension-centered approach in which tensions and paradoxes play a central role in ordering and disordering social reality for organizational members. I use ethnographic methods to shed new light on the discursive processes through which one group of professionals – architects – attempt to make sense of the changes that affect their daily work. In so doing, my thesis links agentic-level activities with tensions generated by changes to the very structure of professional work. My findings suggest that in an era characterized by increasing skepticism of experts and professional expertise, traditional conceptions of professional identity and occupational status require revision. I present my thesis as four distinct journal articles that are linked by the investigation of how architects negotiate professional identity and status as they seek to manage complex tensions, triggered by the changing nature of their work. I conclude that more accurate

understandings of how people employed in complex organizations respond to, cope with and move forward amid paradoxical tensions sheds new light on the construction of work-related identities and status and how this occurs in the new world of work. As the world of work becomes more complex and distributed, these understandings are particularly relevant because they have implications not just for individuals' sense of well-being, but also broader, economic consequences for organizations and society.